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DEPARTMENT FOR SA/INS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV SOCI PTER CE LTTE

SUBJECT: UNICEF SEES DECLINE IN LTTE RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN

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SUMMARY  
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1. (U) The recruitment of child soldiers by the Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) has significantly and steadily declined since January, according to reports received by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The LTTE recently renewed its promise to halt underage recruiting in a June 18 meeting with the Executive Director of UNICEF, Anne Veneman. It is unclear whether the decrease in child recruitment signals a new effort by the LTTE to respond to international pressure or if fewer parents are reporting the recruitment of their children to UNICEF. A real decline in LTTE child recruitment would be a striking improvement in human rights for the children of Sri Lanka and could signal a Tiger bid to burnish its respectability in the international community. End summary.

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UNICEF RECEIVES FEWER REPORTS  
OF UNDERAGE LTTE ENLISTEES  
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2. (SBU) There has been a marked decline in the number of reports UNICEF has received regarding child recruitment by the LTTE this year. According to UNICEF figures, the LTTE recruited 156 children in the first five months of this year, including nine children from tsunami relief camps. This is noticeably less than the 440 boys and girls enlisted during the corresponding period in 2003 and the 400 recruited in January through May of last year, as noted in a UNICEF press release. UNICEF bases its information on verifiable reports received primarily from parents. [Note: UNICEF estimates that it receives reports of only 30% of the actual total cases of underage recruitment.] Christine Watkins, UNICEF Project Officer, told poloffs in a June 15 meeting that there is often a lag in reports of recruitment and releases so it is difficult to know precisely the amount of children serving in the LTTE at a given period in time. Watkins told poloffs that recruitment tends to be cyclical, with an increase in enlistment every three to four months that tapers off, corresponding to the beginning of new LTTE training sessions. There remain 1,174 total outstanding cases of child soldier recruitment reported to UNICEF.

3. (U) The Executive Director of UNICEF, Ann Veneman, met with LTTE political wing leader, S.P. Thamilselvam on June 18 to discuss the enlistment of underage cadres by the LTTE. Thamilselvam renewed the LTTE promise to halt the recruitment of children and reassured Veneman of the rebel group's willingness to cooperate with UNICEF to meet this objective. (The Tigers have long held that all the children serving in the LTTE join voluntarily, and that it cannot turn them away, saying that these children come from abusive families or are malnourished.) The Tamil Tigers have recruited fewer children this year due to international pressure, according to a UNICEF press statement following the June 18 meeting.

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IS THERE REALLY A DECLINE  
IN LTTE CHILD RECRUITMENT?  
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4. (SBU) UNICEF Officer Watkins was unsure of the reason for the decline. However, she believes that improved monitoring and public awareness may play a role. For example, Watkins told us that the most popular place to recruit underage cadres is at temple festivals. UNICEF and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been teaming up to deter LTTE child recruitment at these religious events, she explained. As a result, the number of children enlisted by the LTTE at temple festivals has been reportedly reduced to zero, Watkins informed poloff.

5. (SBU) Watkins noted that the majority of reports of underage recruitment UNICEF receives come from government-controlled areas. She suggested fear of the LTTE and inadequate local transportation as partial reasons that

fewer parents in rebel-controlled areas complain to UNICEF.

16. (SBU) The LTTE claims that it has released all of its known child soldiers, but states that some of its enlistees do not have birth certificates. Watkins remarked that the roster of LTTE child soldiers is incomplete and inaccurate, which creates difficulty for UNICEF as it works to verify those released or serving as Tigers. UNICEF will only take a reported recruit off its list if it can verify the release through confirmation by recruits or their family members during home visits. Watkins told us that the transit center for former LTTE child soldiers in Killinochchi has been closed since few underage cadres are directly released to UNICEF, while the other two transit centers never opened. UNICEF was meeting with other concerned groups on June 15 to discuss alternative uses for the transit centers. Watkins predicts the transit centers may be used for vocational training.

17. (SBU) Anne Killingstad, Program Manager at Save the Children, said it is difficult to tell if the recent decline in LTTE child recruitment will continue. In a June 16 meeting, she told us that the LTTE has been relatively well organized in its post-tsunami efforts, particularly in Mullaitivu, where UNICEF received no reports of child recruitment in May.

18. (SBU) Hargrup Haukland, Chief of Mission of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), said to poloff in a June 21 conversation that it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the recent decline in reports received by UNICEF. SLMM has also seen a substantial decline in reports this year in comparison to last year, according to SLMM statistics. In January to May, SLMM received 74 complaints, while in this same period in 2004 SLMM received 173 recruitment cases. The number of verified child recruitments and abductions is approximately the same proportion to the number of reports received in the first five months of both 2004 and 2005. This suggests that although fewer reports have been filed in 2005, approximately the same ratio of LTTE abductions and recruitments are carried out as before.

19. (SBU) Yasantha Kodagoda, Senior State Counsel of the Attorney General's Office in Colombo, told us that according to reports issued by parents of child soldiers to senior police officers and the Special Task Force in the East, child recruitment by the LTTE has only minimally decreased. He believes that the decrease in reports to UNICEF by parents is due to two different reasons. First, parents are less concerned that their children will be killed as members of the LTTE since the LTTE is not currently engaged in armed conflict; thus, they are not complaining. Second, he speculated, the Tamil Tigers have more time to suppress any adults who would challenge their child recruiting practices since the rebel group is not actively fighting the Sri Lanka Army (SLA).

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COMMENT  
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10. (SBU) Undoubtedly, the number of reported recruitments of underage cadres has always been less than the actual total of LTTE child recruits. There is not enough information at this time to draw any conclusions as to whether the enlistment of underage cadres has actually declined or whether (and why) fewer parents are reporting the recruitment of their children if underage enlistment has not decreased. We will continue to support UNICEF and other groups in their efforts to monitor child recruitment and to get the LTTE to honor its 2003 agreement with UNICEF to turn over all child soldiers and desist from further recruitment.